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# All the Same or Strategies of Difference. Early Italian Comedy in International Perspective

“Early comedy is repetitive;” this label sticks to early Italian comedy too. Series with Cretinetti, Robinet and Kri all look alike, and are not so different from their French counterparts, is the statement. The Italians are even often considered watered and plagiarized versions of French comedy. Closer analysis of the genre, however, partly based on extensive film viewing, proves strategies of diversity: on the one side a diversification both within the genre of comedy in action driven and situational comedy, which is transnational, and on the other side an active strategy of marketing and branding which sets Italian comedy quite apart from either its French and its American counterparts.

## *Introduction*

Since the 1985 Pordenone retrospective, early Italian comedy gained new interest internationally.<sup>1</sup> European film collections such as the Desmet and the Joye-Collection containing Italian comedies produced by major Italian companies from the early 1910s, were not available at the time. Over the last fifteen years, the films have been preserved and are now ready for scrutiny by researchers. In addition the availability of information on early Italian comedy has enormously increased by the publication of filmographies like *Il cinema muto italiano*, edited by Aldo Bernardini and Vittorio Martinelli.

While previously scholars focused on national difference among genres,<sup>2</sup> now they have begun to give attention to diversification within a genre. The reason for this shift is due to a difference in background, in action and situation and by developments, such as, the international rise of the feature film. How, then, do Italian comical types relate to their foreign counterparts? Can we trace a similar division in action driven and situational comedies abroad, like we encounter in Italy? Comparisons with contemporary comedy across borders will show many aspects in common. For a reevaluation of Italian early comedy as part of an international style and international film culture the international perspective could be the starting point.<sup>3</sup>

A comparison of national cinemas in the early 1910s is problematic, because, in contrast to the cinema of the 1920s, the concept “national” was more a construction than a reality. By replacing foreign intertitles, every film could be adjusted to a different market and even “localised.” For pre-1914 European distribution and exhibition, nationality was not such a big issue, especially with the short film. Also stylistically one can speak of an international style, as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson have indicated.<sup>4</sup> An international style that occasionally makes identification of pre-1914 comedy difficult.

This attitude, however, deliberately neglects the diversification within early comedy. Not only can one trace company “styles,” but styles are representative for individual production companies. When companies such as Itala, Ambrosio and Cines introduced identifiable comical types from 1909-1910 on, such as Cretinetti (André Deed), Robinet (Marcel Fabre) or Tontolini (Ferdinando Guillaume), then a concept of a unified international comical style becomes even more ambiguous. Robinet is a totally different character from Gigetta or Rodolfi, although all three worked for Ambrosio. Likewise the comedies of Léonce Perret are completely different from those of Onésime, even if both were produced by the French production company Gaumont.

Previously, scholars discussed “the comedians,” as if they were all the same. But every comedian has his own type. Differences not only in physical appearance and performance but also in content, style, technology and actors background can be traced between Cretinetti and Polidor, between Kri Kri and Robinet, as will be shown in this article. Furthermore, a clear difference exists between the farces above-mentioned and the comedies with Gigetta and Rodolfi, or with Vaserhe and Pilotti. The latter ones deal rather with triangular relationships and are more “boulevardier”-like, “with their stories of dreadful wives, nasty mother-in-laws and depressed husbands,” as Vittorio Martinelli remarked.<sup>5</sup>

Martinelli explains the fundamental difference between two kinds of comedy in early Italian cinema, as a difference one also traces in other national cinemas: i.e. the development of comedy from vaudeville and the circus and the development of comedy from the legitimate theatre. This distinction can also be described as the more action driven comedy as opposed to the comedy of a situational kind, often domestic comedy. Comedy tied to vaudeville and the circus diminished drastically in European cinema after the early teens, while the latter type continued as a minor (but not less interesting) genre. With the arrival of the sound film, it became an important genre in both Europe and the United States.<sup>6</sup>

Before dealing with theatrical comedy, we should investigate the more well-known kind of comedy, the vaudevillian- and circus-based comedy, which began earlier. By focusing on four major characters of early Italian comedy we see how action-driven comedy developed in the early teens.

### *Vaudevillian- and Circus-based Comedy*

#### *Polidor: The Circus Master*

The circus clown turned into film comedian was typical of the early film comedy. In 1910 Ferdinando Guillaume (1887-1977) and his well-bred European circus family were enrolled by the Cines company. Well-known as the character Tontolini, Guillaume was also known in Britain and the US as Jenkins. Beginning as an actor, he later became a director, rivaling Itala's trump André Deed aka Cretinetti. Guillaume contributed to Italy's international reputation in the field of comedy. In the autumn of 1911, he moved from Rome to the Pasquali company of Turin and since the Cines company had claimed the name of Tontolini, Guillaume created the new character of Polidor, continuing his double profession of leading actor and *metteur-en-scène*. Deed's

return to France and Guillaume's more mature and complex style, earned him more popularity and esteem, increasing his output to four films a month during the years 1912-1913.

From 1914 on, his film comedies diminished considerably, despite the fact that Guillaume was the only comical actor to pursue a career in cinema after the early teens.<sup>7</sup> From the pied-piper who makes everybody and everything dance in *Il clarino di Tontolini* (Tontolini's Clarinet, Cines 1911) by Ferdinand Guillaume himself and the famous balloon act in Fellini's *La dolce vita* (Riama Film/Pathé Consortium Cinema 1959) Guillaume's long film career and circus background remains consistent. These acts might derive from a performance by Guillaume in a circus arena, where music incites objects to move by themselves.

Guillaume's roots in the circus return emphatically in films like *Polidor e i gatti* (Polidor and the Lions, Pasquali 1913), in which Polidor as a servant substitutes his masters' runaway cats with a pair of young lion pups. Lions were often used in Italian films, although frequently more in drama than comedy. For example, the Ambrosio Films drama's in which Alfred Schneider and his lions performed sensational scenes with female lion tamers. Comedies which included lions as a regular component were typical of French films, especially the Gavroche-comedies, such as *Gavroche fait une riche marriage* (Gavroche Makes a Rich Marriage, Éclair 1912). The character of Gavroche, played by Paul Bertho, looks similar to Polidor, with his small stature, his continuous grimaces towards the camera and his clown-like checker-blocked plaid coat and bowler hat.

Guillaume used all kinds of animals in his films, thus accentuating his circus career. Apart from the lions in *Polidor e i gatti*, Polidor wins the friendship of an elephant whom he liberates from a splinter in his foot in *Polidor e l'elefante* (Polidor and the Elephant, Pasquali 1913). He also becomes hysterical when he thinks he has eaten an infected rabbit in *Polidor mangia il coniglio* (Polidor Eats Rabbit, Pasquali 1913). In *Polidor mangia del toro* (Polidor Eats Bull Flesh, Pasquali 1913) he eats beefsteaks, and becomes strong and aggressive as a bull; a stereotypical plot. The gag of a man going rampant after eating bull meat was already used in France before, in *Un monsieur qui a mangé du taureau* (A Man Who Ate Bull Meat, Gaumont 1909).<sup>8</sup> Many early comedies deal with the effects of eating certain animals. For instance eating a lobster causes one to walk backwards in *Cretinetti ha ingoiato un gambero* (Foolshead Swallows a Crab, Itala 1909) and *Patouillard mange du homard* (Patouillard Eats Lobster, Lux 1911).<sup>9</sup>

### *Cretinetti: Speed and/of Destruction*

If the Polidor films focused more on the grotesque, the Cretinetti films show an enormous speed. Cretinetti's speed in chase, destruction, and in change, was similar to his Boireau-comedies for Pathé. They were also similar to the surreal comedies of Onésime, however, such as *Onésime horloger* (Gaumont 1911) where he speeds up time in order to get an heritage. The unrestricted violence and anti-establishment attitude of the Cretinetti-films is not unlike that of certain French Calino-films or certain early American comedies. His often action-driven films were not the result of a circus background, but rather stem from a familiarity with French variety and cinema.

André Deed was born André Chapais in Le Havre, France, in 1879. He worked as an actor in a dialect-spoken theatre company, in the café-concert, in the Parisian Folies-Bergères and the Chatelet, before starting as a film actor. First he worked with Georges Méliès and subsequently with Pathé, where he starred in a series as the character Boireau. Deed also scripted and directed his own films. At the end of 1908, Itala Film of Turin lured him with an attractive contract, thereby launching the Cretinetti series. Deed's films were extremely popular, not only in Italy, but world-wide. Abroad he was known as Gribouille (France, Holland), Foolshead (Britain, USA) and Müller (Germany). Several renowned Itala actors worked with him such as Valentina Frascaroli and

Emilio Ghione. When Deed returned to Pathé in 1912, followed by Frascaroli, he rejuvenated his character Boireau in *Gribouille redevient Boireau* (Gribouille Becomes Boireau Again), continuing his earlier success. In later years, Deed returned several times to Italy to perform in two-reelers and feature films. Most notable were the films *La paura degli aeromobili nemici* (The Fear for the Enemy Airships, Itala 1915) about zeppelin attacks in wartime, and *L'uomo meccanico* (The Mechanic Man, Milano 1921), in which Deed created a fierce robot character, remote-controlled by television.<sup>10</sup>

Deed has often been praised for one film: *Cretinetti e le donne* (1909) directed by André Dreed himself, in which Cretinetti is torn to pieces by his female admirers.<sup>11</sup> After they leave him, Cretinetti magically reassembles. His enormous shoes underlining his small stature, he reminds us of the even smaller Little Tich, who, around 1900, had a popular vaudeville act in which he wore shoes as long as he was tall. The disintegration and reintegration of the body in *Cretinetti che bello!* however, occurred often in early comedy. Especially in the very first years, in Méliès' films such as *Tom Tigh et Dum Dum* (1903) and *Chirurgie fin de siècle* (Star Film 1902), the latter a parody on the medical films by Dr. Doyen. Deed performed in several films of Méliès, like *Dislocation mystérieuse* (1901), in which he distaches and re-attaches his limbs.<sup>12</sup> In the teens, decapitation as trick film technique is evident in *Kri Kri senza testa* (Kri Kri Headless, Cines 1913) and in the French comedy *Polycarpe veut faire un carton* (Polycarpe Wants to Shoot at Targets, Eclipse 1912) in which Polycarpe is so fond of firing a gun that, shooting a waiter his head off, he then replaces it with a pig's head.

#### *Robinet: Seducer on the Run*

Another character of early Italian comedy known for the destruction he caused, was Robinet, who worked for the Ambrosio company. In contrast with Cretinetti, Robinet was a tall and clumsy type, somewhat less anti-system but still quite provocative. Robinet was also portrayed as a shameless libertine in comedies that seem to unify action-driven and situational comedy. Thus some of Robinet's films are not so far from Feydeau's theatre plays, with their misunderstandings, illicit meetings and triangular relationships.

Marcel Fabre, a pseudonym of Marcel Fernández Pérez, was born in Spain. Originally working as a circus clown, he started his film career with short comedies of Éclair and Pathé. Ambrosio looked for a comedian capable of competing with Tontolini of Cines and Cretinetti of Itala, so they hired Fabre, who started at Ambrosio in March 1910 and who later became a director as well. Internationally he became known as Robinet (France, Spain, Holland), Nauke (Germany, Holland) and Tweedledum (Britain, USA), while his companion, Nilde Baracchi, was known as Robinette. Apart from his own films, Fabre also directed other comedies like Fricot farces in 1913, and in 1914 he made the grotesque feature *Le avventure straordinarissime di Saturnino Farandola* (Zingo, Ambrosio 1914), an adaptation of the science fiction novel by Ferdinand Robida.<sup>13</sup>

Apart from his representation as a fanatic and shameless Casanova, Robinet, he, like other comedians, was often involved in chases. The chase was one of the most frequent ingredients in Italian farces of the teens as well as in the early farces worldwide, where only an alibi was needed to start the running, often causing the destruction of objects and the unseemly demise of innocent bystanders. Usually involving an ever growing group of enraged people join the pursuit, including types like the police officer, the grocery vendor, the waiter and the nanny, they epitomised a society in which law and order, shops, the café and (the servants of) the bourgeois family are fixed ingredients. They are stereotypes, and by no means individualised characters. The genre was known in France as the "course poursuite" and in Holland as the "go-and-throw" films.

Robinet's chase films are often triggered by an improper use of modern means of transportation. In *Robinet aviatore* (Tweedledum Aviator, Ambrosio 1911) his newly designed airplane destroys a rooftop, a car and a chim-

ney, before crashing through five stores and ending up in a police station. The amount of destruction is not unlike the French Onésime-comedies, such as *Onésime et son collègue* (Onésime and His Colleague, Gaumont 1914). In *Robinet chauffeur miope* (Robinet Short-sighted Chauffeur, Ambrosio 1914), a short-sighted Robinet runs over everything with his car, while in *La prima bicicletta di Robinet* (Tweedledum on His First Bicycle, Ambrosio 1910) he causes destruction with his first bike. Plots of this kind were also typical of early French comedy. They proliferated there at an earlier stage and undoubtedly influenced Italian comedy, by such car chases as in *Les débuts d'un chauffeur* (The Inexperienced Chauffeur, Pathé 1906), or bike chases as in *La Première sortie d'un cycliste* (The First Ride of a Cyclist, Pathé 1907) and *Pédalard boit l'obstacle* (Pédalard is Thirsty for Obstacles, Pathé 1907). Another narrative device typical of early Italian and French comedy was a lady chased down by her admirers. In *Signorina Robinet* (Miss Tweedledum, Ambrosio 1913) Robinet's Casanova imago is turned around. Robinet dresses like a woman to escape his girlfriend's angry husband, but shortly afterward the husband becomes affectionate and starts following him in the company of an increasing crowd of admirers. Police officers have to make sure the "lady" returns home safely.<sup>14</sup>

*Kri Kri: Innovation and Special Effects (of Tango and Opium Cigarettes)*

Until recently the figure of Kri Kri, played by Raymond Frau, was a rather undervalued character. Born in Senegal in 1887, Frau began his career as a circus clown and acrobat in France where he performed in vaudeville circuits and café-chantants. In 1912 he started as comic actor at the Cines studios, establishing the internationally popular character of Kri Kri and working together with other Cines players like Lea (Lea Giunchi Guillaume, wife of Natale Guillaume and sister-in-law of Ferdinando Guillaume), Checco (Giuseppe Gambardella) and Cinessino (the son of Lea Giunchi Guillaume and Natale Guillaume). The character of Kri Kri was exported to various countries and bearing different names, such as Bloomer (Britain), Patachon (France, Holland) and Mucki/Krikri (Germany).<sup>15</sup>

The Kri Kri films often contain surreal scenes. In a period when the artistic avant-garde was only slightly involved in cinema and Italian cinema was mainly a bourgeois enterprise, one is still astonished by the special effects need to create an unusual world, in which people decapitate themselves, in which gravity no longer counts and doubles walk through mirrors and pester their "originals". Just as the surrealists were inspired by the French farces, Italian comedies may have triggered the imagination of artists around the world. For example, Kri Kri wins a marriage match in *Kri Kri senza testa* (above). The one who impresses the woman in question most, will gain her hand. Kri Kri removes his head from his rump and wins. The film clearly is a variation on the French comedy *Gavroche fait une riche mariage*, in which Gavroche is the most impressive suitor to a rich American lady by bringing along two real lions.

In *Kri Kri fuma l'oppio* (Kri Kri Smokes Opium, Cines 1913) the comic smokes opium cigarettes and starts to hallucinate, similar to an LSD-trip. First he meets his cheeky valet (a double role by Frau) and in a second shot a host (a third Frau) enters the same image, together with the valet and the original Kri Kri. Through refined trickery, almost invisible, all three act in three separate sections of the image. In another scene, Kri Kri continues to hallucinate in front of the mirror. His reflection starts to pester him and finally crosses the mirror (reminding of the surreal mirror acts in *Orphée* and *Duck Soup*). They begin a fight until the double disappears. Kri Kri cools down and takes a cigarette. He finally realizes that he has been smoking opium cigarettes. Ever since Lotte Eisner, the German Autoren-film *Der Student von Prag* (The Student of Prague, Deutsche Bioscop 1913) has been praised for the theme of the evil double, but apparently the theme was in the air in 1913. In addition, the open display of the use of drugs strikes us as remarkable for those days, though one encounters it

as well in other Italian films like the short drama *Amore tragico* (Tragic Love, Cines 1912), in which a doctor regularly injects his wife with morphine to calm her nerves, until she commits suicide by taking an overdose. Nothing remains in place in the Kri Kri films. The world can be turned upside down and humans loose control over gravity. In *Kri Kri imita Pegoud* (Kri Kri Imitates Pégoud, Cines 1914), Kri Kri attempts to emulate the famous French pioneer aviator by standing on his head and sleeping upside down. When he finally flies the real plane, he falls out of it because he forgets to fasten his seatbelt. In *Kri Kri e il tango* (Kri Kri and the Tango, Cines 1913), Kri Kri tangos with a girl (his partner Lea Giunchi) in spite of the nasty tackles by a rival. They cause the concert podium to collapse, do a leap backwards over a sofa, jump into the water and back out of the water (by reversed motion), and return exhausted into the ballroom. When Lea dances with the rival, Kri Kri takes revenge by tying the couple up and unrolling the rope with such ardour that they start to pirouette at enormous speed. What is unusual for this period is that the camera shows the point of view of the dancing couple, twirling around like mad. Apparently they are standing on a rotating platform, together with the camera. The effect is that of a merry-go-round.<sup>16</sup> In *Kri Kri balla* (Kri Kri Dances, Cines 1915) the unrolling of the rope and the gyrating platform is repeated in the end. Kri Kri sees two dancers on a stage doing pirouettes. At night he dreams he is a perfect dancer, but falls out of bed. The next day he practices but hits the maid, giving her a black eye. She helps him exercise by tying a large rope around him and unwinding it. The twirling Kri Kri however is contagious. Everywhere he passes the persons and objects begin to pirouette too: first the furniture in his house, subsequently people at his front door, then booths, a car and persons lying on the floor and the host and guests of a tea party. Finally we see the spectators in a cinema pirouetting while simultaneously on the screen a subjective shot taken from a quickly rotating platform is visible, expressing the blurred vision of the pirouettters on the on-lookers. One is reminded of the dance frenzy of *Il clarino di Tontolini*, but also of Max Linder's *Entente cordiale* (Pact of Hearts, Pathé 1912).

As Yuri Tsivian points out,<sup>17</sup> the tango was at its zenith around 1913, providing the subject for tango-comedies all around Europe such as *Max professeur de tango* (Max as Tango Instructor, Pathé 1914) with Max Linder, *Tango in Russia* (Cines 1914) with Checco (Giuseppe Gambardella) and *Die Tangokönigin* (The Tango Queen, Vitascope 1913) with Hanni Weisse.<sup>18</sup> Comparing the frenzy of the Cines-production *Kri Kri e il tango* with the much more subdued version of Vitagraph's *Tangled Tangoists* (1914), a film also dealing with the tango craze, one notes a totally different approach. John Bunny and Flora Finch meet at a soirée and fall in love. They are both unable to dance the tango, the dance of all the soirées, and separate from each other they decide to take lessons. By chance, they take lessons in the same dance school, in two adjacent rooms. Of course they are both quite clumsy and torture their teachers. Flora spies upon John through the keyhole and John looks upon her through a crack in the door. At the next soirée they dance the tango and everybody complements them. In the coach back from the party, the coach wobbles like the tango, to the delight of the couple. The tango has contaminated them such that they marry tangoing (more a sort of wobbling) and everybody wobbles with them, including the mayor. One year after: Flora wakes John up as the two babies do not sleep. Tangoing they wobble them to sleep. What is striking here is the absence of frenzy and the voyeuristic aspect of the keyhole.

### *Theatrical Comedy*

*Tangled Tangoists* is representative of a different kind of comedy, which had its counterparts in Italy at the same time. Along the comical films centred on one popular figure, Italy also produced vaudeville-like comedies, such as those of the Ambrosio company with Gigetta (Morano), (Eleuterio) Rodolfi and Camillo De Riso, involving triangle love, and adultery. By creating a mood more suited for a chuckle or a smile rather than for peals of

laughter, these films used a more restrained kind of humour comparable to the Gaumont comedies directed by Léonce Perret. Often there is an element of voyeuristic complicity in them, shared with the spectator, thus making him or her an accomplice.<sup>19</sup>

Action is less important as the situation, the misunderstanding, the interchange. Within this, they are closer to the situational narratives of the dramatic features of the teens, denominated and analysed as “situational” by Brewster and Jacobs.<sup>20</sup> The rise of “situation” comedy went side by side with the “gentrification” of cinema, the rise of the feature film and the diversification in movie theatres. Production companies began to make films that resembled more theatrical comedies instead of vaudeville acts. Feature length European comedies were rather theatrical or situational comedies instead of action-driven comedies. That ambiguity within the comic genre is exactly what makes this period in film history so interesting in its transitional phase.

The Ambrosio company produced quite a few of these situational comedies, often starring Gigetta Morano, Eleuterio Rodolfi and Camillo De Riso. The films of the trio were often based on Italian and French fin de siècle *pochades* and grew in length over the years. Gigetta Morano (1886-1986) trained in Turinese amateur theatre before starting at the Ambrosio company, where she appeared in various genres including drama, comedy, romance and crime stories. She had a major success with her role as Mam’zelle Nitouche in *Santarellina* (Mam’selle Nitouche, Ambrosio 1912) by Mario Caserini and became a leading lady of Italian cinema. From 1913, she performed regularly in many Ambrosio comedies, particularly in her Gigetta series, in which she often played against actor Eleuterio Rodolfi as Rodolfi.<sup>21</sup>

Eleuterio Rodolfi (1876-1935) trained as a theatre actor before starting in comical films, where he played a witty and sometimes unfortunate gentleman. From late 1913 on, he began film directing too, focusing on comedy.<sup>22</sup> Camillo De Riso (1854-1924) had a theatre career behind him before starting in film, just like Morano and Rodolfi. A son of a stage actors, he started a family of film actors. Beginning in 1912 at Ambrosio, De Riso formed a successful trio with Morano and Rodolfi, contributing with his rotund face and generous look of bourgeois *bonhomme*. In late 1913 De Riso started at the Gloria company, where he created the gay epicure and shameless libertine character of Camillo.<sup>23</sup>

One typical example of the Morano/Rodolfi comedies is *Vendetta d'amico* (Friendly Vengeance, Ambrosio 1911), in which two friends fight over the same woman. One wins and marries her, but then discovers that she is prodigal. He leaves a suicide note, and she marries the other friend, who soon discovers her wasteful conduct. Husband number one laughingly reappears. In *Un successo diplomatico* (A Diplomatic Success, Ambrosio 1913), Morano is an ambassador’s daughter who travels to Berlin as she suspects her husband of infidelity. Her father (Camillo De Riso), travels to find her, and discovers that she is courted by a diplomat (Rodolfi). He prevents her from making two mistakes (unjust infidelity and adultery) and deters the suitor by informing him that she is a dangerous terrorist. Finally in *L'acqua miracolosa* (The Wonderwells, Ambrosio 1914), a spicy comedy for those years, Morano is married to a childless man who dreams of a swarm of children. Their doctor (Rodolfi) suggests that the wife goes to the miraculous wells. There she meets no other than ... the doctor, after which the husband becomes father. In the end, the father holds a baby in his hands, while his wife lifts a jug in which we see (by special effects) a little doctor. Just as in comedies as *Una tragedia al cinematografo* (A Cinema Tragedy, Cines 1913) adultery is explicitly displayed and sanctioned.<sup>24</sup>

This films resembles the French comedy *Une perle* (A Pearl, Gaumont 1912), in which a son of a well-bred family smuggles his love, a piano-teacher, into the house disguised as the new maid. She serves the parents extremely well and when the fraud is discovered, the parents accept her. The closing scene of the film is witty: a title “And they got many children”, followed by an image of the parents with seven grandchildren on the foreground, the girl and the boy in the back singing and playing on the piano. Then a title “And all of them musicians,” followed by a parallel editing of images.



Images of children as the result of the film's plot occur more often in bourgeois comedies, such as *Léonce à la campagne* (Léonce in the Countryside, Gaumont 1913) or the above-mentioned *L'acqua miracolosa*, and less in action-driven comedy. Instead of unification and procreation, the result in action-driven comedy might be separation and loneliness, as in *Cretinetti fra due fuochi* (Foolshead Between Two Fires, Itala 1910), in which two women fight over Cretinetti, duelling with swords and guns, only resulting in harming the poor man. When he falls into the water, two men save him, after which the women fall in love with the saviours and drop Cretinetti. Injured, his clothes torn to pieces, he first makes gestures as if to say: "one moment you have two, the next you have none" and he walks away, seen on his back.

A recurrent trope of the bourgeois comedy is the keyhole, in which the complicity and the acknowledged voyeurism is summed up, so typical for early cinema.<sup>25</sup> Keyhole shots regularly occur often in the Ambrosio films but also in the Vitagraph and Gaumont comedies. In *Vendetta d'amico*, one of the suitors looks through the keyhole at the house of Gigetta Morano and, to his dismay, he sees her in the arms of his rival. In *Robinet in vacanza* (Tweedledum Takes His Holidays, Ambrosio 1912), Robinet spies upon a girl in a dressing cubicle. In *Robinet innamorato di una cantante* (Tweedledum In Love With a Singer, Ambrosio 1911), Robinet runs after a singer he has fallen in love with and peeks through the keyhole at her door. He sees the singer (again Morano) in her underwear, putting on a nightgown. She laughs at the camera teasingly, thus at Robinet but also at us. In the plot she apparently is unaware of being spied upon as she goes berserk when Robinet sneaks into her room and offers her a bunch of flowers, but we know better.

Keyhole scenes were not restricted to Italian bourgeois comedy, but in American and French bourgeois comedy as well. We have already mentioned the scene in *A Vitagraph Romance* (1912) by James Young in which Flora Finch spies upon Bunny practising. What is remarkable here is that we not only get the subjective shot through the hole, but also a close up from the other side, showing Finch's eye, bulging almost like the shot in the classic British pioneer film *Grandma's Reading Glass* (1900) by George Albert Smith.<sup>26</sup> A Gaumont example of a keyhole scene is found in *Vengeance du sergent de ville* (The Vengeance of the Policeman, Gaumont 1913) by Louis Feuillade. Here a police-officer terrorizes his neighbours by playing on his bugle. While they are plotting against him, he drills a hole in the wall and peeks through.<sup>27</sup>

### *Marketing and Self-referentiality*

An important aspect of early Italian comedy is its "flair" for marketing and self-referentiality.<sup>28</sup> Looking at the films, it often becomes clear how strong the production companies' hold was on their "golden goose" and how they used comedies for self-promotion, for their "construction". The company was already continuously visible through logos on intertitles and leaders at the end of the films. It was also visible through the continuous output of their comical films with recognizable and ever returning comical heroes and through publicity materials accompanying the films like posters and photos, containing the same brand names and logos. But moreover, the company's brand name would often pop up within the narrative, mostly at the conclusion of the film.

One of the first within the genre is *Cretinetti ha rubato un tappeto* (Itala 1909). Cretinetti steals a carpet and is chased by a queue of followers up a roof. Finally he rolls himself up in the carpet, everybody falls down the roof and on the carpet a text reads: "Itala Film." In *Cocciutelli affissatore* (Milano 1911), poor Cocciutelli tries to fix his posters but is chased everywhere. He ends up in jail, where he finally can fix his poster upon the wall. Of course it is a poster for ... the Milano Film Company. At the end of *Attenti alla vernice* (Itala 1913) our hero (Ernesto Vaser) has the springs of a chair glued to his bottom. Like a kangaroo he escapes a frantic mob by jumping up a wall, through an open window. Laughingly he closes the shutters on which there is a poster of the Itala company.

Finally there is the example of *Il clarino di Tontolini*, in which even the capitoline lio and Romulus and Remus, the normally static logo of the Cines, start to dance to the music, thus confirming the company's presence. A variation on this method is *Cretinetti nella gabbia dei leoni* (1910). Cretinetti quarrels with a lion tamer who puts him in the lions cage. He escapes but is haunted by the lions, first at his house and afterwards in a cinema. Everybody runs, while on the screen runs a film by Cretinetti. The lions however sit calm and watch Cretinetti on the screen, while the real Cretinetti sits next to a lion and salutes the audience. In this the film is not so much a promotion for the company as for the character itself.

### *Establishing a Name: Pathé and Competition*

This kind of playful self-promotion can also be seen in French comic films, much less in American comedy. The French company Pathé was the most active in promoting its brand name and going further in this than merely attaching a cockerel in the settings to prevent copyright. During the period of travelling cinemas, Pathé-films were deciding on the larger part of the film programs, but presented anonymously to their audiences except for the original Pathé posters outside the cinemas. After 1907 the strategy changed. Pathé became a name of prestige. For instance in the Netherlands, Pathé organized in 1907 a large brand name promotion, touring the country with programs consisting exclusively of Pathé films.<sup>29</sup> Exhibitors eagerly continued the brand name promotion in order to profile themselves.

From 1908, other production companies such as Gaumont, Vitagraph as well as Ambrosio, Cines and Itala were rising on the international (European) market and managed to establish their names. All these companies marketed themselves by guaranteeing continuity: continuity in a steady output, which was most visible in the constant and highly frequent output of short comedies and which was even enforced by developing comical characters that would just stand for a certain brand name. Exhibitors just would advertise "new films from Pathé, Gaumont and Vitagraph etc."

without mentioning titles in the late tens – the name was guarantee enough, films were interchangeable. This policy would be changed in advertising single titles, especially with the rise of the feature film – from 1910 on in Europe. Concerning short comedies, character names were now coming strong. Even if one did not know the plot line of the film, the names of Max Linder, Boireau and Rigadin for France and Kri Kri, Cretinetti and Robinet for Italy would guarantee a certain amount of quality in the genre. Local distributors would buy the films *a scatola chiusa*, with the lid closed. Exhibitors would rent them in the same way.

A nice French example of the marketing of the brand name is *Les Incohérences de Boureau* (Pathé 1913). Here Boireau (André Deed, before known as the Itala-comic type Cretinetti) acts consistently incoherent: in order to get down from his hammock he shoots the ropes with a revolver, he fishes a hare and kills a fish, he borrows clothes from a portrait of a forefather, he puts on an armour and leads a company on a wrong track. Finally he attaches a symbolic duck to the door of his house, the French word "canard" meaning not only "duck" but also "of tune" and "stupid." On the door, the letters "Pathé frères" are written, thus suggesting that a duck instead of Pathé's symbolic cockerel is another incoherence.<sup>30</sup>

### *Films on Film Making, Cinema's and Film Publicity*

Companies were indirectly advertised for by referring to films in films, for instance when films in a picture house were being shown. When characters visited a nickelodeon or other kind of cinema, it was most of times

a film by the production company of the “real” film. This kind of self-referentiality occurred more often, both within the dramatic and comical genre, especially in French and Italian cinema, but also in American cinema. Italian comedy also dealt with specific Italian films and with cinematography as a new professional world. The latter was shown in films such as *Robinet operatore* (1912) and *Tontolini scrittore di soggetti cinematografici* (1911). Apart from “casually” showing posters for a blockbuster of the company such as in *Una tragedia al cinematografo*, special comedies linked to famous films or characters were made, like *Kri Kri e il Quo vadis?* (1912), a reaction on the most spectacular epic of 1912-1913, *Kri Kri Giulio Cesare* (1915) on the success of the Cines epic from 1914-1915, and *Polidor Za-la-Mort* (1917) on the Italian answer to Zigomar and Fantomas, the master criminal Za-la-Mort, played by Emilio Ghione. Short comedy thus commented on and confirmed, even if mocking, the prestige of Italian feature films and serials.

Another kind of self-referentiality was the display of posters outside a cinema, indicating the name of the company and titles of their own films. A long-running tradition existed, starting years before the first Italian comedies. Already before 1900, the British Mutoscope & Biograph Co. used these means in *The American Biograph in the Palace or It's unlucky to pass under a ladder* (c. 1899). In this film a bill-sticker is attaching announcements to a wall in which one reads a/o. the titles of the *Dreyfus-film* and *The Wonderful Mutoscope*, the latter a comedy promoting the mutoscope. This trope continued well into the 1910s. An example from that period is *The Right Girl?* (Vitagraph 1915) by Ralph Ince. Here the characters meet in front of a nickelodeon, where a billboard prominently publicizes a Vitagraph film. This however, was also a very common (and maybe even more common) aspect of both American and European cinema from the early years on.

A Cines variation of comedies dealing with cinemas and promoting the company and its films is the short *Una tragedia al cinematografo* (Cines 1913), with a then still unknown Pina Menichelli as leading actress. A jealous man pursues his mundane wife (Menichelli), who chats with a male friend in front of the entrance of a cinema. The cinema is covered outside and inside with posters of the 1913 Cines top hit *Quo vadis?* by Enrico Guazzoni, a publicity stroke for the Cines company. Merry people in carnival outfits prevent the husband from seeing whether his wife has entered the cinema. Convinced that she is in there, together with her presumed lover, the husband fights his way in and threatens the manager of the cinema that he will shoot his unfaithful wife. The manager stops the projection – a film about an adulterous woman reading a secret letter from her lover, naturally – and warns the public that a jealous husband awaits his unfaithful spouse with a gun at the exit. The hilarious result is that, when the projection is restarted, all adulterous couples secretly flee from the theatre. When the lights are on again, the room is almost empty. Apart from being a funny film on the cinema as locus for illicit *rendez-vous*, the idea of spectators watching a film in which they see other spectators watching a film creates a sort of Chinese box-effect used more often in Italian cinema as in *Al cinematografo, guardate ma non toccate* (Itala 1912) and *Maciste* (Itala 1915) by Giovanni Pastrone, thereby increasing the sensation of cinematographic voyeurism. This is even more so in *Una tragedia al cinematografo* because of the publicly shared secret of adultery.

How much did this film represent adultery in cinema in real life? The example of *Una tragedia al cinematografo* stands between Gunning's idea of early cinema as cinema of attractions versus the Metzian idea of voyeurism in classical narrative cinema.<sup>31</sup> Voyeurism in the cinema of the teens was apparently an acknowledged and explicit voyeurism in contrast to the later disavowed voyeurism of classical cinema.

### *Self-referentiality in International Perspective. Films on Studio's*

A way to promote the name of a company was by producing films that centered around the film studio. Examples are *Come Vardannes entrò alla Milano Films* (1912), in which the comedian returns to the Milano stu-

dio after holidays to Britain and a visit to a British film set; *Cenerentola* (Ambrosio 1913), in which a young girl debuts at the Ambrosio studio (several images of film activity in- and outdoors), plays Cinderella and gets her prince in real life too; and *Capriccio del miliardario* (Cines 1914), in which long distance runners cross Rome diagonally on a certain parallel and run right across the Cines studio, full of activity. In *Mariute* (1918), a comedy transforming in drama, we see Francesca Bertini at home and at work at the Caesar studio, almost parodying herself with all of her star caprice, but then establishing herself as dramatic actress, playing war drama's to raise war bonds. The message here is that both Bertini and the Caesar studio do their bit for the war cause. In general, several Italian films dealt with representations of the studio's as "saviours" to problems of ordinary mortals. This can be found in comedy as well as action film and drama.<sup>32</sup>

An American version of the film about the studio as "saviour" is *A Vitagraph Romance* (Vitagraph 1912), a very clear promotional film by Vitagraph.<sup>33</sup> The message was clearly a boast for Vitagraph: two penniless newly-weds find jobs at the Vitagraph studio and the quality of the films they play in is such that her father, a stiff banker, cools down, reconciles with the two and agrees to their marriage. However, apart from Vitagraph, not so many American examples are known. From Biograph, for instance, there does not seem to have been any film promoting the company while Griffith worked there. American cinema generally would not show self-promotion in such a playful way as the Italians or the French.

A reason for the less explicit self-promotion of companies in early American films could be the different structure of the film world. Many production companies were tied in with the trust of the Motion Picture Patents Company (1912) or affiliated with the Independent conglomerate of Universal. Attention on individual companies could therefore be distracting from the trusts and joined companies. However, the MPPC did not do a lot of self-promotion in their films, maybe because of the internal troubles within the trust.

Towards Europe they profiled more as separate companies, although some were represented by European distribution companies like the British-based (but with agencies in several European countries) M.P. Sales Company, that resold films of Kalem, Lubin and American Biograph.<sup>34</sup> Vitagraph marketed itself best in Europe and became a brand name that stood for quality in drama and comedy, the moderated alternative for the Northern-European disgusted by all too hectic and dramatic French and Italian productions.<sup>35</sup> The Vitagraph name was conspicuously visible on posters and other publicity materials and on intertitles. Most American companies had a hard time spreading their products in countries with strong production outlets like France and Italy. Only Vitagraph, with its Paris based laboratory, managed to establish itself quite well. Vitagraph posters printed in France and designed by French artist Harry Bedos carried titles in two or three main West-European languages.<sup>36</sup> If there has been any way of exchange between American comedy and Italian comedy on Italian soil, then my suggestion is to research the connections between Vitagraph and the Italians.

## Conclusion

We need to recapture our concept of early Italian comedy. It was strongly rooted in French comedy and not only because of the presence of comedians originating from France such as Deed or from the French colonies and trained in France such as Raymond Frau. Many Italian comedies used plots or subjects which were used earlier in France and in the United States. On the whole this should not surprise, as French comedy, especially Pathé's, was wide-spread over the world, including Italy, before Italian fiction film started on a regular basis.<sup>37</sup> American influence or exchange seems more problematic, as American cinema was not very widely distributed in Italy in the 1910s. However, a research on a vaster scale than ours would specify or could moderate this. We have a feeling that sometimes the influences were the other way around. Close research on similarities between

the Cretinetti films and the previous and subsequent Boireau films could be a starting point, for instance focusing on the recurrent trope of self referentiality in both series.

Certainly, the Sennett comedies are full of excess, destruction and extreme speed. However, confronted with the speed, destruction and excess of certain Max Linder films, the Gaumont action comedies with Onésime and Calino and certain Cretinetti and Robinet films, American slapstick does not entirely come of its own accord. On the other hand, the restrained domestic comedies of Gaumont and Ambrosio show that a production company did not just make action films, but diversified its genre production in action driven comedy and more what we might call situational comedy – the precursors of our sit-coms. In their subdued style, the Gaumont and Ambrosio domestic comedies are not so far from the American comedies from the same period, in particular the Vitagraph comedies and some of Edison's production company. Just as Léonce aimed at smiles, while Onésime aimed at roars, we are convinced that the Italians aimed at peals of laughter with their Cretinetti and Robinet comedies, but set their sights on sniggering and stealthy looks with the Morano/Rodolfi comedies.<sup>38</sup>

Early Italian comedy centred around the bourgeois society with its class distinction, its rites and locations. However, when one takes a closer look, one notices a call for modernity (even if it was continuously mocking), an urge for innovative and sometimes radical gags that express and challenge the doubts and the struggles of a society in transition.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> P. Cherchi Usai, L. Jacob (a cura di), *I comici del muto italiano*. *Griffithiana*, no. 24-25 (ottobre 1985). Informative and inspiring was A. Bernardini's article in this volume: "Appunti sul cinema comico muto italiano," pp. 21-35. For early Italian and early European comedy in general, see also: P. Cherchi Usai, "Acrobaten, clowns en helden in de komische films," in I. Blom, N. Voorhuis (eds.), *Hartstocht en heldendom: de vroege Italiaanse speelfilm 1905-1945* (Amsterdam: Stichting Mecano, 1988), pp. 43-53; T. Brandlmeier, "Fin de siècle Comedy Culture," in H. Belach, W. Jacobsen (eds.), *Slapstick & Co. Frühe Filmkomödien/Early Comedies* (Berlin: Stiftung Deutsche Kinemathek/Argon, 1995), pp. 17-71.

<sup>2</sup> G. P. Brunetta, "Il clown cinematografico tra salotto liberty e frontiera del West," in *Griffithiana*, cit., pp. 11-20.

<sup>3</sup> K. Thompson, "The International Exploration of Cinematic Expressivity," in K. Dibbets, B. Hogenkamp (eds.), *Film and the First World War* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1995), pp. 65-85. See also B. Brewster, L. Jacobs, *Theatre to Cinema* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> D. Bordwell, K. Thompson, *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), p. 48. See also note 3.

<sup>5</sup> Conversation with V. Martinelli, 7 July 1999.

<sup>6</sup> Theatrical comedy featured in the 1930s with Camerini in Italy, with René Clair in France and with Hawks and Sturges in the United States. In the 1920s it already knew its continuation in the United States with the De Mille society comedies. In Europe it knew its counterparts in French comedies by the Albatros studio and Italian comedy based on French boulevard theatre like *Il controllore dei vagoni-letto* (The Controller of the Wagons-Lits, Alba Film 1922) directed by Mario Almirante and based on a play by Alexandre Bisson; *La Dame de chez Maxim's* (The Lady from Maxim's, Rinascimento Film 1923) and *Occupati d'Amelia* (Take Care of Amelia, Rinascimento Film 1925), both Georges Feydeau adaptations starring the French comedian Marcel Levesque and the Italian diva Pina

Menichelli. In 1925 two more Italian comedies with Marcel Levesque followed: *Il tacchino* (The Turkey) produced by Mario Bonnard, after *Le Dindon* by Feydeau and *Teodoro e socio* (Theodore and Company) produced and directed by Mario Bonnard, after *Théodore et Cie* by Robert Armont and Nicholas Nancey.

<sup>7</sup> In 1915 Guillaume began his own production company, Polidor-Film. In 1916 he worked for the Caesar company and in 1917 and 1918 for Tiber Film. In 1921 and 1922 his last films, two feature comedies, were released by his own company Polidor Film. The company was encaptured within the UCI trust, which collapsed in 1922, dragging into its grave a wide range of Italian companies from the previous period. Most biographical information on the various characters of early Italian comedy has been taken from *I comici del cinema muto*.

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<sup>9</sup> G. Marlia, "Ferdinando Guillaume, in arte Polidor," in P. Cerchi Usai, L. Jacob, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-61.

<sup>10</sup> For *L'uomo meccanico*, see M. Canosa, "Il crepuscolo dei divi (muti e italiani)," *Cinegrafie*, no. 4 (1991), pp. 123-124.

<sup>11</sup> Now indicated in the catalogue of Bernardini as *Cretinetti che bello!* (Too Much Beauty, Itala 1909). A. Bernardini, *Il cinema muto italiano, 1905-1909* (Roma: CSC/Nuova ERI, 1996), p. 263.

<sup>12</sup> For Deed and Méliès, see P. Cherchi Usai, *Giovanni Pastrone* (Firenze: La Nuova Italia, 1985), pp. 22-23. See also P. Cherchi Usai, "André Deed, piu del solito," in P. Cerchi Usai, L. Jacob, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-43.

<sup>13</sup> Shortly before Italy joined the Allied Forces in the First World War, Fabre emigrated to the United States. There he tried in vain to break through with his Jester Comedies. He worked for smaller companies like Pasha, Sanford and Arrow in the twenties. His leg was amputated after an accident at work and some years later, in 1929 he died, all forgotten.

<sup>14</sup> The chase trope was important to other Italian characters too, like Butalin (Cesare Gravina). Gravina moved to Hollywood in 1915, where he played in the films by Eric von Stroheim from *Foolish Wives* (Universal Super Jewel/Carl Laemmle 1921-1922) until *The Wedding March* (P. A. Powers/Celebrity Pictures 1926-1928). In the thirties he returned to Naples.

<sup>15</sup> He remained in Italy until his return to France in early 1916, where he created the character Dandy and performed in various Eclair shorts.

<sup>16</sup> The unstable image was not new, if one thinks of examples like *The Fatal Sneeze* (C: Hepworth 1907) and *The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend* (Edison 1906), in which the image wiggles to the left and to the right. In *Kri Kri e il tango* however, the unstable image is seen from a subjective perspective. The spectator is wiggling, looked upon by the crowd in the scene.

<sup>17</sup> Y. Tsivian, "Russia 1913. Cinema in the Cultural Landscape," *Griffithiana*, no. 50 (maggio 1994), pp. 135-139.

<sup>18</sup> It was also often included in drama as in the Eclair-drama *Le Tango de la mort* (1914) and the Italian diva-films *La donna nuda* (The Naked Truth, Cines 1914) and *Sangue bleu* (Blue blood, Celio 1914). Representation of the period in later films was often linked to the tango, one of the most famous examples being Valentino's tango in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Metro 1921) directed by Rex Ingram.

<sup>19</sup> See for the Morano-Rodolfi-comedies and other Ambrosio films, my article, 'Un tesoro nascosto. I film Ambrosio nella collezione Desmet', in P. Bertetto, G. Rondolino, *Cabiria e il suo tempo* (Milano-Torino: Il Castoro/Museo Nazionale del Cinema, 1998), pp. 117-125. For Perret's comedies, see R. Abel, *The Ciné Goes to Town. French Cinema 1896-1914* (Berkeley etc.: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>20</sup> B. Brewster, L. Jacobs, *op. cit.*

<sup>21</sup> Morano stayed at Ambrosio until 1917 and performed in a few films in the twenties. Just like Guillaume, Gigetta Morano also performed with Fellini, in *I vitelloni* (1953) and *Otto e mezzo* (1963).

<sup>22</sup> In the mid-teens, Rodolfi expanded to drama, mainly historical drama and theatrical adaptations, enlisting various *monstres sacrés* of the Italian theater. In 1917 he began his own company and he returned to the stage in the twenties.

<sup>23</sup> De Riso also performed in feature films at Gloria, like Lyda Borelli's first feature *Ma l'amor mio non muore* (Love Everlasting, 1913) directed by Mario Caserini. There he played the joyful little impresario who brings Borelli's character onto the stage. In the second half of the 1910s, he directed films with major actresses like Leda Gys and Francesca Bertini. De Riso continued working in the light comedy genre into the early 1920s, but then the genre faded and his career was over.

<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, just a handful of the Morano-Rodolfi-comedies survived.

<sup>25</sup> The acknowledged voyeurism in keyholes has a long history in film history, going from such early examples as *The Inquisitive Boots* (Hepworth 1905) and *Un coup d'oeil par étage* (Pathé 1904) to Lubitsch' *Die Austernprinzessin* (PAGU 1919).

<sup>26</sup> There is still discussion if this is a G. A. Smith film or a film by Arthur Melbourne Cooper. See the discussion in *KINtop* no. 3 (1994), no. 4 (1995) and no. 5 (1996) and *Film History*, no. 11 (1999).

<sup>27</sup> Keyhole shots were also essential to detective stories like Perret's *L'Enfant de Paris* (In the Clutch of the Paris Apaches, Gaumont 1913) and Benjamin Christensen's *Det hemmelighedsfulde X* (The Mysterious X, Dansk Biograf 1913).

<sup>28</sup> On self-referentiality in early cinema, including Italian films, see S. Lenk, "A la rencontre du spectateur d'avant la Guerre de 14," in *Archives*, no. 61-62 (avril-mai 1995), pp. 1-11.

<sup>29</sup> I. Blom, "De eerste filmgigant in Nederland. De snelle verovering van Nederland door Pathé," in K. Dibbets et. al. (eds.), *Honderd jaar film in Nederland: het begin. Jaarboek Mediageschiedenis* 8 (Amsterdam: Stichting Mediageschiedenis/Stichting Beheer IISG, 1997), pp. 129-152.

<sup>30</sup> Michelle Aubert (Centre National de la Cinématographie) to the author, 8 December 1999. Other examples are *Rêve de Chin-Ko-Ka ou Magic Bricks* (year unsure) in which an actor disguised as a Japanese plays with cubes he has collected and that facing the spectator form the Pathé cockerel, and *Les Affiches animées* (1908). Henri Bousquet to the author, 16 December 1999. Pathé also used the non-fiction genre to promote itself. In *Comment est fait le fromage de Hollande* (Pathé 1909) the closing shot of the film shows a girl cutting out the coquerel in a Dutch cheese and bringing the carved cheese towards the camera/spectator.

<sup>31</sup> T. Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avantgarde," in *Wide Angle*, vol. 8, no. 3/4 (Fall 1986), pp. 63-70. Ch. Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: MacMillan [1975], 1982).

<sup>32</sup> A striking film in the action men genre is *Maciste* (Itala 1915), a comic action film in which a girl is menaced by her uncle. He wants to eliminate her and her mother in order to get a heritage. The girl flies into a cinema, where the Itala-epic *Cabiria* (Itala 1914) is being projected. Impressed by Maciste's force and courage she writes him for help. Next we see images of the Itala studio, both outside and

inside, full of activity. The film ends with Maciste saying to the girl, after the uncle and his gang have been taken away: "If you ever need me, my address is Maciste, Itala Studio", thereby not only linking the character to the studio but also auto-promoting the studio as the rescuer of the oppressed. Ambrosio did a dramatical version on the same principal in *Per il babbo* (Pasquali 1913), in which a little boy becomes a juvenile actor at the studio in order to provide money when his father is too sick to work. His absence from school is forgiven when they see the results of his acting. In the end, the father gets a job at the studio through which the traditional order of the father as bread-winner is restored.

<sup>33</sup> A bank manager visits a movie theatre and sees his eloped daughter and her boyfriend in an exotic drama produced by Vitagraph. Impressed by this, he visits the studio. He is received by the management – Stuart Blackton playing himself here; one of the others is Albert Smith – and guided around the studio lot. The banker passes by the studio buildings and by a huge line of extras in exotic costumes. He finds his daughter and her friend back on the set and reconciles with them. Vitagraph is not only promoted in the narrative, but also in the set design. In Blackton's office a large statue of the Vitagraph eagle stands prominently on a desk. The Vitagraph eagle with its spread wings was well-known to cinema audiences from the Vitagraph logo used in intertitles and endleaders and before 1910 as cut-out in sets to prevent pirating.

<sup>34</sup> K. Thompson, *Exporting Entertainment. America in the World Film Market* (London: BFI, 1985). See also my book *Jean Desmet and the early Dutch film trade* (Amsterdam University Press, 2002). Ben Brewster to the author, 21 December 1999.

<sup>35</sup> A. van Beusekom, *Film als kunst. Reacties op een nieuw medium in Nederland, 1895-1940* (Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 1998).

<sup>36</sup> Many of these are present in the Dutch Desmet-Collection.

<sup>37</sup> I let alone the turn-of-the-century films with the Italian vaudeville artist Fregoli here, which one even could discuss as whether they were Lumière films or independent productions.

<sup>38</sup> If comedians like Guillaume and Frau clearly showed their roots in circus and vaudeville, Morano, De Riso and Rodolfi showed their roots in regional and dialectical theater. The different backgrounds of the various comedians diminish then the surprise of the later Italian Feydeau adaptations and the path all the way leading up to *telefoni bianchi* and the *commedia all'italiana* from the post-war period.